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RUCPDO/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 3150
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2400
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 2265
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4596
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2844
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: GRANTEE RELOCATES TO FIND MORE RECEPTIVE
AUTHORITIES; LESS RECEPTIVE AUDIENCE

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: On November 25, PAO visited an active grantee that runs an after school educational center and has found far better tolerance and cooperation with local authorities after recently moving the center to a different town. Now located in Ruhabat, on the outskirts of Ashgabat, the new program has many new school-age participants in a program that is appreciated by authorities and parents. This successful transfer of her program shows that there is significant local diversity in government authorities. It also shows that there are often indirect ways to make blockaded programs work, despite the interference of authorities. However, her new participants are surprisingly more interested in studying Russian than English; and many of the girls lack motivation for advanced study or careers. This demonstrates the limits of public outreach to rural areas. END SUMMARY.

THE REASON FOR MOVING: AN ALL TOO COMMON RUN-AROUND

13. (SBU) Democracy Commission grantee Maya Ovezova (protect throughout) used to run a popular after school program in the town of Annau, a short distance east of Ashgabat. At her center in a small leased commercial space, she oversaw courses in English language, computer skills, leadership and civic values. During the course of her work she had various problems with local authorities even though she held a valid educational license from the Ministry of Education. Usually, she was able to resolve these, but reported that one of the three schools in Annau had a director who forbade that school's students from attending her program.

14. (SBU) Then starting in mid-2008, local authorities claimed that Ovezova's Ministry of Education license did not specify that she could operate in Annau and required her to obtain a new license from the Ministry before she would be permitted to continue her work or renew the lease for the premises. The Ministry of Education told her that her license was valid for all of Turkmenistan and to take up the problem with the Annau officials. The Ministry refused to provide any written clarification or to contact the Annau officials themselves. (NOTE: This kind of bureaucratic "catch-22" is not

uncommon in other contexts. END NOTE.)

SEMI-SURREAL "GOLDEN AGE" LOCATION

15. (SBU) After weeks of a stalemate between the Ministry of Education and local authorities, Ovezova learned through personal contacts that the mayor of Ruhabat, an "ex-burb" on the opposite side of Ashgabat, would be easier to work with. In October, she re-opened her program in Ruhabat's new, white marble shopping center just off the main highway that heads northwest from Ashgabat towards Balkanabat. Ruhabat is slightly further removed and less connected to Ashgabat than Annau.

16. (SBU) When PAO visited the shopping center in November over half of the commercial spaces available for lease by business owners were vacant. There were a couple of small convenience stores, a photography store and a wedding dress store. Ovezova's program occupies one of the smallest spaces, but she noted that the city mayor invited her to take "any space she wanted." Eerily the two-story, echo-filled center was largely devoid of people besides shopkeepers or the 15 or more preteen students congregated in and around Ovezova's modest educational center.

JUST OUTSIDE THE CAPITAL, BUT FAR MORE "PROVINCIAL"

17. (SBU) Ovezova and a teacher-volunteer led the gathered computer skills class in a short PowerPoint presentation of her center's activities since reopening in Ruhabat. PAO then engaged the students in Q&A about the United States and also about students' future plans. All students were Turkmen native speakers and only used minimal Russian or English. Most expressed an interest in

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learning Russian over English. Some of the boys had aspirations to study in Russian universities, and one discounted that he'd ever have the chance to study in America. (NOTE: PAO heavily promoted USG education programs and tried to add a heavy dose of optimism. END NOTE)

18. (SBU) In later discussion, Ovezova noted that she was trying to persuade many of her female students to aim for something more ambitious than waiting for arranged marriages and becoming housewives. Although more than half of her students are girls, she noted that in contrast to her experience in Annau, many are sent by parents who want to keep them out of trouble, and have less of an interest in personal development. Ovezova is confident that with time the girls will see greater possibilities.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite the continued authoritarian tendencies, Turkmenistan has potential for successful development projects and civic activity. Much depends on the personalities in specific locations. This is the first example of a Democracy Commission grantee completely "moving shop, that we know about. But such major changes are demanded by the difficult obstacles of working in Turkmenistan. However, another striking difference by locale is the more limited and more pro-Russian worldview of the students in Ruhabat. While many outreach programs have a dramatic impact in Ashgabat or other major cities, smaller towns and villages are far behind. END COMMENT.

MILES